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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the issues in early reading instruction to be presented at Institute X. The issues discussed include sight word lists for beginning readers, choosing instructional methods in reading that complement individuals' learning styles, a pragmatic approach to teaching reading comprehension, literal reading comprehension, the effect of incentives for teachers upon the reading skill development of elementary school children, and reading skill retention. (WR)

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Issues in Early Reading Instruction: Keynote

(A paper presented as part of Preconvention Institute X, Issues in Early Reading Instruction, at the annual meeting of the International Reading Association, April 30-Mayl, 1974, New Orleans, Louisiana.)

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Welcome to Issues in Early Reading Instruction. If you check your convention program, you'll note that this session is designated Preconvention Institute X. The "X" carries many symbolic meanings; but in this particular case there may be some prophetic implications as well. The "X", for example, is accepted as the signature of an illiterate person. Data from a recent survey of the IRA membership show that 88.7 per cent of the presenters at Preconvention Institute X are indeed illiterate. And, of course you know that the "X" is often used at the end of a written communication to indicate a kiss. Data from another, more informal survey show that at the 1973 IRA convention 24.8 per cent of the male presenters in Preconvention Institute X tried to kiss 97.6 per cent of the females attending the convention.

But perhaps the most widespread symbolic use of the "X" is to indicate an unknown quantity. Which brings me to the purpose for the Institute and to the purpose for my remarks. We are here to consider some of the issues--some of the X quantities--in early reading instruction. Our purpose is not so much to resolve them as to understand them and to examine directions for continuing to deal with them in future research and practice. I shall discharge my responsibility as keynoter by attempting to deal very briefly with the X quantity in the issues to be considered in this Institute.

Our first presenter, Professor Gustafson of the University of Wisconsin at LaCrosse, tackles the sight vocabulary issue. I should make it clear that the issue of his concern--and the one that I think has some real importance--has to do with the composition and ordering of sight word lists for beginning readers. This explication is

important because all too often we become involved with a false issue when we talk about sight words. The false issue is foisted on us by our shallowest critics who insist that somewhere out there a vast army of evil reading educators is teaching reading by forcing innocent children to commit the unnatural act of memorizing all the words in the language as sight words! Now in all my forty-two years I have never heard one single reading teacher even whisper that the way to learn to read is to memorize all the words there are. Nevertheless, our critics--and in Wisconsin they range from the governor's wife, to a University regent, to the guy who cleans up at my favorite bar--continue to tell us that if only we would give up our empty headed see-and-say teaching and return to good old fashioned phonics instruction we would be back on the path to true happiness and universal literacy. Such uninformed criticism by itself doesn't make an issue; yet the see-and-say versus phonics harangue can amount to a false issue. But that most emphatically is not our concern in Preconvention Institute X.

I'll not go into the rationale for it here, but most reading educators agree that it is worthwhile for beginning readers to learn some words as sight words. The issue, then, is not <u>whether</u> but <u>what</u>: <u>what</u> words and in <u>what</u> order. For a couple of decades the issue was resolved by default. The Dolch list reigned supreme. Children happily earned their gold stars, M and Ms, parental approval, and--in the happiest of circumstances--entrée into the wonderful world of understanding words in print by shuffling successfully through their Dolch cards. But then, in the continuous process of sifting and winnowing

that is tradition at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Dale Johnson sifted and winnowed a new and better sight word list.

"Burn your Dolch lists!" he cried. But even before the glow of multitudinous fires had faded from the skys, there came an out-powering of word lists such as has never been seen before. The gates were open, the dams were burst, the skids were greased! The great sight word issue was alive again! In the Renaissance of the last two or three years dozens of new sight word lists have been devised. We have one from one of our most venerable colleagues, Albert J. Harris. The immediate past-president of the IRA, William Durr, gave us another. The Reading Teacher brought us the Fantastic Oglethorpe County List. And I must admit that I, too, succumbed and conspired to devise the Great Atlantic and Pacific Sight Word List.

Now my task as keynoter is not to resolve the issue or even to display my biases, but I am moved to make a few observations. In the first place, if we look at only the most frequent hundred words or so, everybody's list looks a lot like everybody elses'. Perhaps the issue, then, is not so much what goes on the lists as what the order ought to be. Johnson, for example, has attempted to order the words on his list by finding out which of the words are known by children at various grade levels. Words known by most first graders, then, would be assigned to the first grade level and so on. To me this represents the same kind of circular reasoning we get if we first assign six year olds to first grade and then argue that first grade is the place for six year olds because that is where we find most of them. Gustafson, on the other hand, will argue that the way to order

the sight words is to establish their learnability and then to arrange them from most to least learnable. That approach has the appeal of being orderly, systematic and sensible, but I frankly wonder whether strict learnability is the best basis for ordering the words. The overlap between learnability and interest is, I think, far from perfect. To me, a pragmatic-empirical approach--translated, that means "if it works, do it"--makes the best sense. That is, look at the words to be encountered in early instructional materials in a given situation and then teach the high frequency ones from a good reliable list as sight words. Of course that puts us back where we started: choosing the best possible list in the first place. I have some ideas about how to proceed with that, but I'll restrain myself until after Professor Gustafson's presentation.

Our second presenter, Professor Erickson of West Virginia University, raises a question that I think is of extreme importance to everyone who has responsibility for children's learning: how can we best choose instructional methods in reading that complement individuals' learning styles? While we could identify a number of issues related to that question, it seems to me that the main issue has to do with whether we should (a) continue our endless quest for THE BEST method for teaching reading, or (b) begin seriously to seek ways to bring children's learning styles and pedagogical procedures into better focus. Certainly our quest for the best in the first millenium of reading instruction has not been so fruitful as to entice us to continue in that direction. In fact if we can infer anything from the thousands of studies related to reading that have

been reported in the past it is that the best method for teaching reading is as diverse as the teachers who teach and the children who learn. So talk of matching pedagogical practices to cognitive styles and of ati (aptitude treatment interaction) research is music to ears that ache from the cacophonous quibbling of hucksters of methodologies that ignore individual differences.

At this moment in time we are, it seems to me, closer to being able to make the individualization of instruction a reality than we have ever been before. We have a good understanding of individual differences, an almost endless variety of readily available instructional materials, well trained teachers, the basic technology for efficient diagnosis and record keeping, and access to hospitable learning environments. In fact we have everything we need to individualize instruction EXCEPT efficient, reliable, viable ways to assess the learning styles of individuals. For that we must continue to rely on the largely subjective judgments of teachers who know their pupils. But maybe that is as good as we can--or should want to--get. Perhaps whether we should want to go beyond the good judgments of perceptive teachers in dealing with learning styles is the underlying issue that we ought to be considering. Professor Erickson will tell you where we are now in his presentation.

Bob Chester, our third presenter, is my colleague at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His topic is reading comprehension, and the approach he advocates breaks it down into identifiable, teachable, attainable skills. A pragmatic approach, he calls it. The issue, as I see it, is whether this approach or some other alternative is the way

to go in order to get children to the point where they can derive literal understandings from the symbols they encounter in reading tasks.

If one looks at the research related to reading comprehension, one must be struck by the paradoxical glut of data and dearth of real information that are the residual of what has been done. I suppose we shouldn't be surprised that the going has been rough because whatever is involved in "reading comprehension" is also involved in that elusive thing that is human intelligence. Yet perhaps we attempt to do too much when we tackle all of human intelligence in the name of reading comprehension. Bob Chester will argue that literal comprehension ought to be our chief--or at least our first--concern when we teach reading. I heartily concur with that position. Too often, it seems to me, we are asking children to draw inferences, extrapolate conclusions, empathize with main characters, and interpret an author's meaning before we have troubled ourselves to know that they have got a literal understanding of the stuff they've read. In our attempts to show that we are super sophisticated educators by never stooping to ask detail questions, we ask little kids to infer where the red vehicle is going and why without bothering to ask whether they knew the damn thing was red in the first place.

Now I've gone and given away my bias regarding reading comprehension. That may be an impropriety for a keynoter charged with the identification of issues. But again, I think the issue is clear. There are those, on the one hand, who would teach reading comprehension by (a) limiting it to its literal, convergent aspects, and (b) breaking

it down into describable, assessable, teachable skills. On the other hand, there are those who would approach it on a more global, comprehensive level. The discussion should be interesting.

Doctor Roger Klumb has gone off to seek his fortune outside the secure, ivy convered walls of academe. As Product Manager for Interpretive Scoring Systems he must grapple each day with realities that we academics steadfastly refuse to deal with, except on our our own terms. Nevertheless, the study he will describe in making his presentation--which the program tells you deals with the issue of teacher accountability--really evades most of the issues that seem to be emerging with regard to teacher accountability.

Doctor Klumb will describe his study of the effect of incentives for teachers upon the reading skill development of elementary school children. The question he's getting at is whether efforts to get teachers to try harder will be paid off in terms of their pupils' achievement. In my opinion, the study does tackle an important problem, but it does not yield any definitive results. Of course you can judge that for yourself. Despite the fact that the study does not deal with the real issues in teacher accountability, it does make what I consider to be two worthwhile contributions. First, it gets down some procedures for dealing methodologically with the study of incentives for teachers. The main problem, I think, insofar as the "no differences" finding is concerned is that the differences in incentives were trivial. To be effective, incentives must be significant and substantial. As it was, there were no jobs to be lost, no positions to be gained, no fame to be attained, no pot of gold to be had, no second mortagages to be lost.

But the procedures are there to be refined when next someone has the audacity to look at the use of incentives for teachers. Second, the study demonstrates the function of behavioral objectives and criterion referenced tests in directing and assessing the act of teaching. That, to me, is important. But it does bypass the most basic issue related to teacher accountability.

The basic issue, as I see it, is whether or not there ought to be such a thing as teacher accountability. Some will argue that teachers who prepare children for life must deal with such transcendental matters that there is no way that the matters can be accounted for or that the teachers can be accountable. Others insist that teachers, like other professionals, ought to be held accountable for their acts. Now reality--or perhaps the word is sanity--probably lies somewhere between those two positons. But the fact is that some are for it and some are against it, and that's the basic issue. I'm sure you'll hear more from both sides before this Institute is over.

Yet even if we take accountability as a given, there are many issues to be resolved. Doctor Klumb takes the position that accountability is best demonstrated by objectives and with criterion referenced tests. Others will argue that accountability can be demonstrated in other ways. Some feel that accountability ought to be limited to the basic skill areas, like reading and math. Others feel that teachers should be accountable for all areas of the curriculum and for affective outcomes as well. But I see no need to go on with such a recitation here. The battle will begin soon enough.

Our last presenter is Bob Rude from Rhode Island College. We saved him until last for Preconvention Institute X because he is, himself, an unknown quantity. I can say that authoritatively because just last week I did a survey. I randomly selected ten of the first eleven people I encountered in the hall of the Teacher Education Building and asked them, "what's a Bob Rude?" Nobody knew.

Bob's presentation has to do with reading skill retention. The unknown quantity is retention. The existing research is inconclusive. Some results suggest that the skills, once mastered, are retained at a reasonably high level. Others suggest that unless: periodic and intensive review is provided the skills are not retained at an acceptable level. Some of the confounding undoubtedly is, as Bob will point out, a function of the measures used. Therey may, for example, be a stronger tendency for "general reading ability" to atrophy over, say, a summer vacation than for specific skills like the ability to deal with beginning consonants, short vowels, or compound words. At issue, then, is whether norm referenced or criterion referenced tests are likely to yield the more useful information regarding the retention of reading skill. And, in order to get at that one, we have to tackle the larger issue of whether teachers ought to worry specifically about explicitly described sub-skills or save themselves for more general, global performance. Personally, I'm caught in a real dilemma. (Let me remind you that being in a dilemma is not merely being confused; it is being caught between equally undesirable alternatives.) On the one hand, successful reading is clearly much more than a sum of the sub-skills that we can identify and describe.

The whole is indescribably greater than the sum of its parts! On the other hand, while successful reading is a credible outcome, it remains today as elusive as it was when Thorndike tried to get hold of it in 1917. We can recognize it when we see it; but we don't really know how to look for it!

The dilemma is a real one, and at the present time we do not have a way to resolve it empirically. Instead we resolve it on the basis of the feelings in our guts, on the basis of our limited personal experiences, and on the basis of our own philosophical inclinations. I can sum up my own resolution by paraphrasing Patrick Henry's greatest line: "I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me skills or give me death!" Now I readily admit that my position may derive more from my conceptual limitations than from my superior insights. But I've taken a position and I'm trying to put it to empirical tests.

Meanwhile, while all the empirical tests are being run, we must continue to cope with all kinds of issues in reading education. Here at Preconvention Institute X we shall focus on five of them. I am sure that at times the discussion will be heated. But I am confident that more light than heat will be generated. If we can reduce the unknown quantities by even a little bit, then Institute X will have been a success.